

The Ghost of Ladora

MILDRED WIRT BENSON

"Fog" was the bob-tailed title of the short story printed in *Lutheran Young Folks* in 1935. My eye fell upon the yellowing issue as it tumbled from an old filing cabinet. The story bore my name, Mildred Augustine Wirt, a Ladora, Iowa, graduate of The University of Iowa School of Journalism. Certainly I had written that story and nearly one hundred others at a previous or slightly later date, yet blessedly all memory of this tale of aviation's early day had erased from my mind. Scanning it, I winced at a few aeronautical inaccuracies; yet it did seem to carry suspense and imagination, particularly the latter. for in the 1930's my nearest approach to flight had been a brief ride taken as a child with a Cedar Rapids pilot who barnstormed Iowa towns in an old jenny. Reviewing "Fog," it dawned upon me that my style as a writer of action books for young people already had been set, a style which possibly evolved from extensive childhood reading of *St. Nicholas Magazine*.

Not style, however, but content, snagged my attention. In this tale of a girl who, despite feelings of inadequacy, successfully challenged the skies, did I not detect a long-slumbering personal wish? Until this moment, the motivation which led me, late in life, to become a pilot had gone unrecognized. At an age when wiser persons welcome Social Security, this misguided author took up flying, earned advanced ratings, and presently functions as a commercial pilot, reporter, and aviation columnist for a Toledo newspaper.

Significantly, now that I might be better qualified to write aviation fiction, I feel no urge to do so. Facts, I am sure, would fetter my imagination. Scenes which rolled rather smoothly in "Fog" would by an aeronautical mind be rejected as "improbable." So too would the

Editor's Note: The title of the present essay has been supplied by the editors, who note that while a good half of her books were "ghost written" by Mrs. Benson using a variety of pen names, she has in fact published more than fifty volumes under her own name.

several out-of-print aviation fiction volumes contrived by me for Barse & Co. in the 1930's. *Ruth Darrow in Yucatan* (1931), for example, combined flight with archaeology, of which I then knew nothing. Later the subject became an absorbing hobby, leading to nine trips to Mayan Indian sites in Yucatan and to more remote parts of Central America. However, having savored fascinating reality, I felt no compulsion to make printed use of any material gathered. Glancing over shelves usurped by 120 to 130 volumes of juvenile fiction written by me over a thirty-year span, I cannot avoid the conclusion that much of my writing was based upon unfulfilled desire for adventure.

Even as a child, a determination to write possessed me. I detested dolls, but played with hundreds of tiny wooden spools, moving them as actors on a stage. "When I grow up I'm going to be a GREAT writer," I proclaimed to anyone who would listen. In those uncomplicated days, "prolific" was unknown in my vocabulary. When I was twelve, my first short story appeared in *St. Nicholas Magazine*. Others followed, printed primarily in denominational papers.

Soon after obtaining a bachelor's degree in 1925 at The University of Iowa, and working a year on a Clinton, Iowa, newspaper, I headed for New York City. An anticipated writing job failed to materialize, but I did meet Edward Stratemeyer of East Orange, New Jersey, head of the Stratemeyer Syndicate and author of numerous series books, including the famed "Rover Boys." The syndicate, so flourishing today, then consisted of Stratemeyer himself, a secretary, and a few "ghosts" who accepted a brief plot outline, vanished, and returned to the office weeks later with a finished manuscript.

Shortly after my return to Iowa, a letter came from Mr. Stratemeyer, offering me an opportunity to continue the then-faltering "Ruth Fielding" series. This full-length book was written at my parents' home in Ladora, Iowa, and it fought me on every page, as I could gain no kinship with the main character. A second volume, *Ruth Fielding Clearing Her Name* (Cupples & Leon, 1929), came easier. By this time I was brain-deep in graduate work at The University of Iowa. The story was written on a typewriter in the old journalism school. Fortunately my professors assumed that I was hard at work on a thesis.

Next came a chance to undertake a new series, "Nancy Drew" (Grosset & Dunlap), one destined to dominate the popular market for more than forty years. Mr. Stratemeyer died soon after it was launched. But under his two daughters who took over the syndicate, and at request of the publisher, I continued writing the Nancy books through the first twenty-five, ending with *The Ghost of Blackwood Hall* in 1948.

The plots provided me were brief, yet certain hackneyed names and

situations could not be bypassed. Therefore I concentrated upon Nancy, trying to make her a departure from the stereotyped heroine commonly encountered in series books of the day. Never was Nancy patterned after a real person, unless as one who recently interviewed me suggested: "I gain the impression that Nancy was yourself." In writing, I *did* feel as if I were she, but then when I created the Dot and Dash stories for younger children (Cupples & Leon, 1938) I likewise felt as if I were Dot's obnoxious dog, Dash. Not only in the Nancy books, but in others written after my association with the syndicate ceased, "feel" for a situation and presentation of a character with which readers could identify, were my goals.

Mr. Stratemeyer expressed bitter disappointment when he received the first manuscript, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, saying the heroine was much too flip and would never be well received. On the contrary, when the first three volumes hit the market they were an immediate cash-register success for the syndicate. Over a thirty-eight-year period, the series was printed in seventeen languages and, according to published report, achieved sales of more than 30,000,000 copies.¹ As "ghost" I received \$125 to \$250 a story, all rights released.

Analysis is not one of my accomplishments. However, it seems to me that Nancy was popular, and remains so, primarily because she personifies the dream image which exists within most teen-agers. Definitely, Nancy had all the qualities lacking in her author. She was good looking, had an oversupply of college "dates," and enjoyed great personal freedom. She never lost an athletic contest and was far smarter than adults with whom she associated. Leisure time was spent living dangerously. She avoided all household tasks, and indeed, might rate as a pioneer of Women's Lib.

Under the name of Wirt, the "Penny Parker Mystery Stories" (Cupples & Leon) later took shape, with a heroine similar to Nancy, though performing in situations more to my liking. These tales achieved popularity but were plagued by distribution problems and never overtook the fleet-footed Nancy. In addition to many pen names owned by the syndicate, I used at least five of my own, including Don Palmer, Dorothy West, Ann Wirt, Joan Clark and Frank Bell. Also, I wrote extensively as Mildred A. Wirt and published a few books as Mildred Benson. Usually pen names were selected by the publisher, who wished to avoid glutting the market with too many books by one author. In my most prolific year I turned out thirteen full-length volumes under

¹ Arthur Prager, "The Secret of Nancy Drew," *Saturday Review* (January 25, 1969), p. 18.

various pen names, writing the entire list of new books for one publisher.

When I was writing with ease, words fairly flowed from my typewriter. Always I sought for rhythm by word, sentence, paragraph, and ultimately by chapter. If all were achieved, a story seemed to gain suspense—in effect, hooking the reader. As work piled up, writing became increasingly burdensome, physically and mentally. The most trying part for me was the making of a detailed outline. An order would arrive, perhaps several simultaneously. Titles, outlines, the dates at which manuscripts could be delivered, would be requested, all “at earliest convenience.” Always panic took possession of me. If only I had an idea! A plot! Three plots! Usually several days of painful concentration would bring the glimmer of an idea upon which one could build. First, the story’s opening problem and the climax were plotted. If these were sufficiently strong, and basic complications satisfactory, then interior chapters fell into place.

Selection of a title normally preceded the plot, preferably a short one, easily understood and lending itself to illustration. Often a title immediately suggested its own story, so that an outline readily took shape. Titles in this category included *Whispering Walls*, *The Shadow Stone*, *Through the Moon-Gate Door*, and *The Clock Strikes Thirteen*. However, one can be betrayed by closeness to a subject. In the first individual mystery story written by me for Cupples & Leon in 1935, this misguided author proudly called her masterpiece *The Gimmel Ring*. Publisher Arthur Leon wisely suggested *Twin Ring Mystery*. This change, plus the fact that my loyal mother purchased fifty copies, I’m sure was a vital factor in launching me as a writer.

Few of my books ever rated display on librarians’ shelves. An exception was *Pirate Brig* (Scribner’s, 1950), an ambitious attempt at a boys’ historical yarn. Many months of labor went into this book, compared to a few weeks spent on more popular-type material. Other volumes which found a place on public library shelves included *Dangerous Deadline*, winner of the 1957 *Boys’ Life*-Dodd Mead contest, and *Quarry Ghost* (1959) written for the same publisher. *Dangerous Deadline* was based upon newspaper experiences mostly gleaned from others, including William Maulsby, one of my journalism teachers at Iowa City.

Rarely, if ever, is Iowa mentioned by name in any of my stories, but different localities from this state nevertheless appear in numerous book scenes. For example, in *Ghost Gables* (Cupples & Leon, 1939) the first chapter carries a brief description of a college-town boat

landing which could be no other than the old Iowa City canoe dock of the 'twenties on the Iowa River. Vermont figured in many of my tales for children, but only as reflected through stories told me as a child by my pioneer grandfather. As I turn to such volumes as *Dot and Dash at the Maple Sugar Camp* (by Dorothy West) rich memories come flooding back. This story and others which intermingle Vermont and Iowa life include antics of a mischievous dog once owned by my husband, and recollections of fascinating automobile trips made through the countryside with my father, a Ladora, Iowa, doctor. In particular, a visit to the home of a farm lady with a peacock seemed to have left a lifelong impression. Long after these books appeared, a genealogy tour of Vermont confirmed that my grandfather had accurately described maple-sugar mountain country and passed down its true flavor. The trip was most delightful, but I do not recall that ever again I made use of Vermont in my writing.

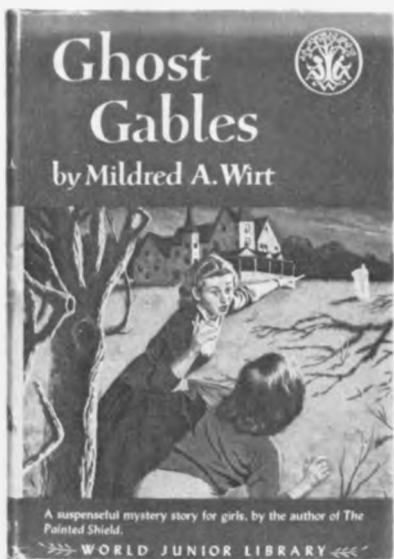
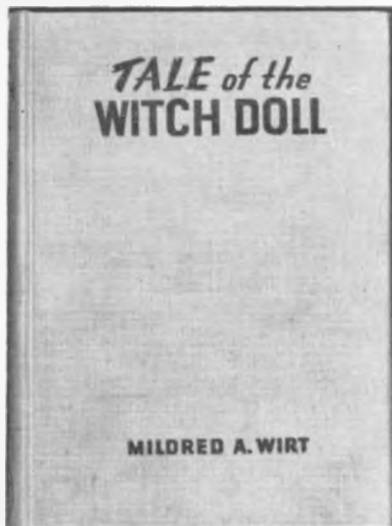
Quite suddenly, creative activity ceased. Personal loss came into my life. At the same time, a large backlog of published books was wiped away when the Girl Scout organization objected to any writing use of the word "scout." In one swoop, Cub Scout, Girl Scout, Explorer Scout and Brownie Scout books went down the drain. "Why write?" I asked myself. Obliging, ideas took themselves elsewhere. Not long ago an editor, after coming upon out-of-print Penny Parker books, wrote that his firm planned to launch a modern series for teen-agers based upon the drug abuse and other social problems. Would I undertake it in the style of my old mysteries? For a moment, I was tempted. Plots began to percolate. Then fog settled over my typewriter. The teen-agers for whom I wrote lived in a world far removed from drugs, abortion, divorce, and racial clash. Regretfully, I turned down the offer. Any character I might create would never be attuned to today's social problems. In my style of writing there can be no time concept, no chains binding one to the present.

To be remembered for more than an hour, a tale must ride in a sealed capsule, isolated from everyday living. A presentation should be as true to childhood aspiration in the year 2003 as in 1906. Such sentiments definitely identify an author with a swiftly receding past.

So now it is time for the final chapter, seemingly one destined from the beginning. A fadeout becomes the most difficult of all, for though the story is finished, the reader must be led to believe that the very best lies directly ahead. New worlds to conquer! New horizons to explore!

Ruth Darrow and all the pilots of fantasy suddenly take shape before our eyes, their wagging wings flashing the personal message: "Come fly with me."

Such challenge cannot be denied. Work forgotten, we hasten to the nearby airport where a small plane awaits its all-too-willing passenger. Eagerly we take off, climbing high above the smog, the petty perplexities of life. The sky is blue . . . the wind blows free. Here at last, far above the earth, age and youth imperceptibly blend, and stern reality dissolves into the ultimate Magnificent Dream.



Four of the many books for juvenile readers written by Mildred Wirt Benson, who is a native of Ladora, Iowa. From the Iowa Authors Collection.